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Report on the field visit of Members of the Bureau of the UNICEF Executive Board to Lao People's Democratic Republic, 9-16 February 2008**

Introduction

1. Members of the Bureau of the UNICEF Executive Board, H.E. Mr. Anders Lidén, Permanent Representative of Sweden; H.E. Mr. Hamidon Ali, Permanent Representative of Malaysia; H.E. Mr. Mihnea Motoc, Permanent Representative of Romania; H.E. Mr. Jorge Skinner-Klée, Permanent Representative of Guatemala; Mrs. Ami Diallo, Chargé d'Affaires of Mali; and Mrs. Kirsi Madi, Secretary of UNICEF Executive Board, visited the Lao People's Democratic Republic from 9 to 16 February 2008.

2. The objective of the visit was to gain a first-hand understanding of UNICEF work at the country level. More specifically, the visit aimed at demonstrating concrete examples of UNICEF cooperation with the Government and with other partners, including the United Nations country team. Furthermore, the visit provided an opportunity for the members of the Bureau to better understand the issues and challenges facing children and women in Lao People's Democratic Republic.

3. The delegation would like to express its gratitude to the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic for the excellent programme and opportunities for substantive dialogue with senior members of the Government. Special appreciation is due to the dedicated staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for coordinating and facilitating the visit.

4. The delegation would like to thank at the outset the UNICEF country team in Lao People's Democratic Republic for the extraordinarily well prepared and organized visit, and for the staff's ready availability throughout the visit. The Bureau was

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** This document was submitted late due to the need for consultation among the members of the delegation.

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impressed by the high level of commitment, dedication and professionalism of UNICEF staff.

5. The following report summarizes the briefings received by the delegation. The report concludes with the delegation's own observations.

Key issues impacting the situation of children and women

6. Lao People's Democratic Republic has a population of 5.6 million, half of which is below 18 years and two thirds of which lives in rural areas.

7. While the country has recently experienced positive economic growth of about 7 per cent and higher, the benefits for the population remain largely uneven. Some 23 per cent of the population lives on less than $1 per day. Lao People's Democratic Republic is ranked 130 out 177 nations in the global human development index. The aim of the Government is for Lao PDR to graduate from least developed country status by 2020.

8. In its relations with neighbouring countries and the region, Lao People's Democratic Republic has introduced a new approach that moves away from the concept of 'landlocked' country towards one of a 'land-linked' country involving increased regional integration and rapidly multiplying linkages with neighbour nations. While this trend overall is clearly positive and can be expected to contribute to economic growth, the Government at the same time recognizes the possible negative implications and consequences of increased cross-border movement of goods and persons. The delegation was able to see first-hand the impact of this closer cross-border movement when visiting Oudomxay Province, one of the poorest areas in the north.

9. Access to adequate and quality social and health services remains a priority concern. Delivery and utilization of basic services is affected by disparities in geography, gender, and ethnicity. Limited investment in the social sector is one of the impediments to improved coverage and quality of services. Other challenges are linked to limited human resource capacity, the relatively small number of implementing partners, and dependency on official development assistance. Unique development challenges arise from the fact that the population is largely rural and located in remote areas, and ethnically diverse.

Young child survival and development

10. Chronic malnutrition, among the highest in the region, is widespread, affecting some 41 per cent of children under five. An estimated 13 per cent of rural households are food-insecure, while as many as two thirds of rural households are vulnerable to food insecurity.

11. The infant, maternal and under-five mortality rates remain high. Some 70 infants out of every 1,000 born alive do not reach their first birthday, and 98 children for every 1,000 born alive do not reach their fifth birthday. Over the past years, some progress has been achieved in reducing child mortality, and efforts to reduce maternal mortality continue. Critical factors for reducing mortality for all three groups are improving access to quality health services (only 18.5 per cent of births are attended by health professionals) and ensuring access to information.

12. On the positive side for child survival, a measles vaccination campaign conducted at the end of 2007 reached 96 per cent of children between 9 months and 15 years of age. Some 60 per cent of children under five are immunized, and the challenge remains to achieve full immunization coverage for children in their first year of life. Lao People's Democratic Republic has achieved polio-free status but this is threatened by limited access to immunization and quality health services. Another positive contribution to child survival is the fact that 87 per cent of children under five years of age sleep under mosquito nets.

Water, sanitation and hygiene

13. Only 58 per cent of households have access to an improved source of drinking water and only 45 per cent use improved sanitation facilities. The lack of improved facilities and limited awareness of hygiene practices contribute to the fact that diarrhoea is the second-biggest killer of children.

14. UNICEF-supported action focuses on three areas: schools, rural communities, and nationwide planning and monitoring, with an emphasis on sustainability.

15. In schools, the installation of latrines in a gender-sensitive manner has contributed to improved school attendance. This focus on sanitation in schools is complemented by a drive for hygiene awareness. Through the "Blue Box" resource kit developed by UNICEF, children learn vital hygiene messages, turning them into practice in school and bringing them home to their families, thereby helping to improve hygiene awareness in communities.

16. In rural communities, priority is given to constructing appropriate latrine and water supply facilities. Establishing water-quality testing at the village level and ensuring that communities have the ownership of the new facilities and their maintenance are essential elements for ensuring sustainability of interventions.

17. At the national level, UNICEF has supported establishment of nationwide water-quality surveillance and has boosted service-delivery capacity for planning, installation and maintenance. Water-quality monitoring of surveillance at the village level for identification of biological contamination has also been strengthened nationwide.

18. In support of the Ministries of Health and of Education, the Lao Youth Union and Lao Women's Union, and in cooperation with the World Health Organization and World Bank, UNICEF has contributed to increased access nationwide to safe water supplies and improved sanitation facilities, enabling a growing number of communities and schools to be connected to improved water, sanitation and hygiene facilities. UNICEF has also contributed to strengthening the capacities of national counterparts in planning and implementation to ensure sustainability of all actions.

Basic education

19. Access to education remains a serious challenge, particularly in remote areas. While 84 per cent of children enrol in primary school, only 50 per cent complete grade five. Enrolment levels are the lowest for girls in remote, mountainous areas populated by ethnic groups.

20. In close cooperation with government partners at national, provincial and district levels, UNICEF has focused its action on four areas:

(a) Developing a child-friendly schools strategy, which now has been adopted by the Ministry of Education as a national strategy to achieve Education for All by providing a healthy, safe and enjoyable learning environment for children;

(b) Aiming to reach children who are out of school, especially girls in remote areas that have diverse ethnic groups;

(c) Expanding learning opportunities, especially by enabling young children to have physical, social and cognitive preparation for the start of grade one;

(d) Supporting the reform of the education sector, including the development of basic education policies, strategies and legislation. This effort also includes support to the implementation of the 2006 Vientiane Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

21. The delegation visited a child-friendly school in Oudomxay, which was an impressive demonstration of the integrated approach linking a positive learning environment, overseen by qualified and engaged teachers and school directors, with school feeding provided by the World Food Programme (WFP), gender-sensitive sanitation facilities, safe water, key hygiene and health messages, and physical exercise for the children.

22. The delegation noted with special interest the engagement by the community, school director, teachers as well as students themselves in developing and maintaining this child-friendly school environment. The link between regular growth monitoring of the students and children's referral to health facilities as necessary was also noted with appreciation. The remaining challenge is to ensure that all children in Lao People's Democratic Republic have access to child-friendly schools in the future.

23. The adoption of the child-friendly school concept as a national strategy last year was a clear demonstration of the impact of the contribution of UNICEF to the education sector and has resulted concretely in an improved teaching and learning environment. A child friendly-school is rights-based and inclusive of all children. It provides quality education by ensuring the training of teachers and child participation. A child-friendly school provides a safe, healthy and protective environment with safe drinking water, clean latrines for girls and boys, and freedom from corporal punishment. Child-friendly schools are also gender-sensitive: girls are encouraged to express themselves in the classroom and to participate equally with boys in school activities.

24. The education sector working group, co-chaired by UNICEF and the Australian Agency for International Development, has helped to build partnerships and improve donor coordination in the sector. The group has overseen the creation of an education sector development framework and various education policies.

Child protection

25. The changing socio-economic situation and increased cross-border movement is exposing children and youth, and in particular girls, to relatively new social issues such as increased risk of trafficking, violence, sexual exploitation, abuse, HIV/AIDS and drug abuse. UNICEF is using evidenced-based advocacy to support policy and legal reform to protect at-risk children. This is reinforced by a strong focus on advocacy and prevention among families and young people themselves so that they are more aware of the risks and dangers facing them. UNICEF is also working with

government and other partners to fill the gaps in protection, recovery and reintegration of children with their families and communities.

26. A growing number of children are in conflict with the law. A key priority is given to strengthening the capacity of legal personnel, to promoting child-sensitive investigations and alternatives to detention, as well as to improving data collection. UNICEF is supporting the Lao Government to develop legal reforms that meet United Nations standards and guidelines.

27. Lao People's Democratic Republic is heavily contaminated by unexploded ordnance (UXO), which pose a serious protection challenge for children and have a direct impact on economic productivity and access to basic services. Together with other United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UNICEF supports the promotion of mine risk awareness among communities most affected by UXO. Education is crucial to improving knowledge of the risk of UXO.

28. As in many societies, exploitation, abuse and violence at home are topics not openly discussed. UNICEF has recently supported a study on violence. The report, once officially approved, should serve as a useful basis for addressing the issue proactively.

29. In collaboration with national partners, UNICEF has concentrated its efforts on advocacy and action based on improved analysis of evidence. Networks aiming to create a protective environment for children most at risk play a key role in this process.

HIV/AIDS and children

30. While the HIV/AIDS prevalence rate is low (0.1 per cent), increasing regionalization, cross-border movement and drug abuse pose growing challenges. Migrant workers continue to be the group most affected by HIV/AIDS. Progress is being made, albeit slowly, with prevention of mother-to-child transmission; broader preventive action is required to avoid a potential AIDS epidemic in the coming years.

31. UNICEF-supported action centres on three key components: (a) prevention of HIV/AIDS among children and young people; (b) prevention of mother-to-child transmission; and (c) care and support for children infected or affected by HIV/AIDS, along with reduction of stigma and discrimination. Antiretroviral drugs are made available free to women who are HIV positive and pregnant and to their newborn children.

32. UNICEF supported the development of an innovative Buddhist life-skills curriculum aiming to reduce the vulnerability of young people to HIV/AIDS and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS. The materials for the programme, developed with UNICEF support, were used in secondary schools by Buddhist monks and nuns who were trained in discussing the dangers of high-risk behaviour linked to HIV/AIDS. The programme has been introduced to 50 secondary schools so far, reaching about 10,000 students in the five target provinces that have large numbers of at-risk youths. The gradual expansion of the programme, closely linked to the secondary school curriculum, shows a potential for scaling up and for ensuring sustainability.

UNICEF in Lao People's Democratic Republic

33. The overall goal of the country programme of cooperation for 2007-2011 between the Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic and UNICEF is to support the Government's commitment to promoting and realizing the rights of all children and women; and thereby also to support achievement of the goals and objectives of the country's Sixth Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan.

34. The key priorities for UNICEF are to assist the Government in:

(a) formulating child-friendly and women-friendly policies by mainstreaming children and women in policies, in practice and in legal reform;

(b) strengthening national capacity to translate policies into operational strategies;

(c) monitoring implementation;

(d) providing increased and more equitable access to and the utilization of quality prioritized basic services benefiting children and women in focus districts in six provinces.

35. The strategies of UNICEF include the following:

(a) evidence-based advocacy, awareness-raising and partnerships to leverage resources for children and women;

(b) capacity-building and technical assistance for development and implementation of policies and laws, setting standards and monitoring the realization of child rights;

(c) strengthening capacities for enhanced delivery of basic social services;

(d) promoting the participation of children, and their families and communities, including women and the various ethnic groups;

(e) gender mainstreaming;

(f) improved disaster preparedness and response;

(g) a focus on rural areas.

36. The programme aims to ensure that children's issues are well represented in national policy and plans. There is limited awareness of child rights at all levels of society, and children have few opportunities to make their voices heard. UNICEF is proactively engaged in encouraging partnerships at all levels of society to ensure the enhanced capacity of the Government and other partners to gather and analyse data on children's issues, to advocate for the fulfilment of children's rights, and to influence policies and behaviour change at all levels of society.

37. Lao People's Democratic Republic has taken important steps to protect the rights of children: the Government has signed the key international conventions and optional protocols, including the Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on children in armed conflict; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

38. The Government has also passed a number of laws to provide a national framework for implementation of the international conventions: the Law on Protection

of the Rights and Interests of Children; the Law on Development and Protection of Women, including Chapter IV on Protection of women and children against trafficking and domestic violence; and the Education Law.

39. In addition, a number of important new policies have been introduced or are being prepared. A national policy on child-friendly schools was adopted last year. A draft national nutrition policy is being prepared to address the high levels of malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies. A policy also has been introduced requiring all new schools to be equipped with safe water supply and sanitation facilities. The recently approved National Plan of Action against the Sexual Exploitation of Children provides a good framework for action. And the maternal and child health care core package under preparation will provide an integrated approach to strengthening quality service delivery.

40. While the recent third round of the multiple indicator cluster survey (MICS-3) fills a number of gaps in the collection of data, the availability of data, including that on child rights, is a major constraint in policy-making and monitoring. Efforts are also under way to review the situation of birth registration data collection systems.

United Nations system, donor coordination and aid effectiveness

41. The Millennium Development Goals and targets are reflected in the Government's National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy. The Government will be reporting to the Economic and Social Council in July 2008 on progress made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

42. In 2006, the Government adopted the Vientiane Declaration and country action plan to implement the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. A roundtable process with sector working groups has been established to guide relevant policy changes and necessary actions to support the achievement of Millennium Development Goals and national goals.

43. The United Nations country team has collectively supported donor coordination and the aid effectiveness agenda. The various agencies are acting as co-chairs and supporting the secretariats for the sector working groups (UNICEF for the education sector working group). Good progress has been made in increasing donor coordination and the focus on policy issues.

44. The preparation of the second Millennium Development Goals report galvanized the United Nations country team into speaking with one voice to concentrate the attention of the Government and development partners on the issue of child malnutrition.

45. Both the first United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for 2002-2006 and the second-generation UNDAF for 2007-2011 were developed with the increasing collaboration of the Government and were based on common country assessments. A number of United Nations Theme Groups have been established to support the implementation and monitoring of the UNDAF.

46. A new United Nations Development Programme building, under construction, will house a number of smaller agencies. Larger agencies, such as UNICEF, will remain in their own premises for practical reasons. The members of the Bureau witnessed the inauguration of common premises for WFP and UNICEF in the northern province of Oudomxay. Collaboration between WFP and UNICEF in the three northern provinces has clearly contributed to the increased effectiveness of both agencies in support of child-friendly schools.

Observations

47. The members of the Bureau were pleased to learn about the importance given by the Government to the National Commission for Mothers and Children, which is chaired by the Standing Deputy Prime Minister. This is to be seen as part of efforts to ensure that the best interests of the child are firmly placed as the central focus of the Government at the highest level in all policy development and implementation.

48. The delegation noted the sense of rapid change in the country, noted in the growing regionalization, and underlined the importance of giving adequate attention to the possible negative side effects of the increased cross-border movement of persons and goods and services. The delegation would like to see UNICEF engaged in monitoring the situation closely, to determine the possible impact on children, and continuing its advocacy work to disseminate information about the possible risks and threats to children and youth, and their families.

49. The delegation noted the overall policy of the Government on resettlement. While understanding the rationale for increasing access to social services, the delegation highlighted the need to ensure the protection of children's rights in such moves. The delegation recommends that the United Nations country team and UNICEF monitor the impact on children of the relocation of communities from remote areas to resettled villages, as well as human rights aspects of such moves. Particular attention should also be paid to the choice of relocation areas to ensure sustainable livelihoods. The delegation noted with concern that many of the children who live and work on the street in the capital originated from a resettlement community; this clearly indicates the particular vulnerability among children and youth created by relocation and resettlement.

50. Regarding collaboration with the civil society, the delegation observed the close cooperation with key international NGOs. The delegation learned that the Government was in the process of introducing a decree regarding NGOs.

51. The delegation underlined the critical role of UNICEF in influencing the national agenda and policy formulation through evidence-based advocacy. The recently conducted study on violence is a good example. The delegation welcomed emphasis placed by UNICEF on creating protective environments for children. The advocacy and catalytic role of UNICEF on this issue cannot be overemphasized.

52. The delegation noted with appreciation the cooperation between the Government and UNICEF on child-friendly schools and the efforts together with WFP to attract girls, especially those from remote areas, to attend school. The delegation underlined the importance of ensuring that all children, especially girls, and children from remote areas, have access to quality education, not only as a fundamental human right but also as a key investment in the future of the country.

53. The members of the Bureau noted the good cooperation within the United Nations country team. The delegation congratulates UNICEF for the partnerships established at all levels with the Ministries, and with the local authorities at provincial and district levels, to achieve results for children through evidence-based advocacy and action.

54. In conclusion, the members of the Bureau appreciated the critical role UNICEF plays in support of the Government to achieve the Millennium Development Goals and in support of the protection and fulfilment of the rights of children and women in Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Annex

Summary of the programme of the field visit

Sunday 10 February

1. Briefing by UNICEF staff

Monday 11 February (Vientiane)

1. Briefing by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2. Meeting with the Standing Deputy Prime Minister
3. Meeting with the UNICEF country management team
4. Visit to *Metta Dhamma* Buddhist life-skills HIV/AIDS project, Phonthanh School
5. Meeting with Lao Buddhist Association Fellowship
6. Courtesy visit to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs

Tuesday 12 February (Luangprabang and Oudomxay provinces)

1. Meeting with officials from Luangprabang Province, Luang Prabang City
2. Briefing by officials of Oudomxay Province
3. Meeting with the Governor of Oudomxay Province

Wednesday 13 February (Oudomxay Province)

1. Visit to Nongboua Primary School (child-friendly school), La District
2. Visit to opening ceremony of WFP-UNICEF common premises in Oudomxay town
3. Meeting with UNICEF, WFP, and Ministry staff in common premises

Thursday 14 February (Oudomxay and Luangprabang provinces)

1. Visit to mother and child health outreach services, Houay No Village, Phonxay District
2. Interviews with delegation by youth reporters Houay No Village
3. Visit to immunization mobilization activities, Thapho Village, Phonxay District
4. Visit to dispensary, Nam Bor Village, Phonxay District
5. Meeting with Governor of Luang Prabang

Friday 15 February (Vientiane)

1. Meeting with Vice Minister of Education
2. Meeting with United Nations country team

3. **Meeting with Minister of Health**

4. **Meeting with Child Protection partners and children who live and work on the street**

5. **Visit Peuan Mit Street Children Centre**